

The Quality of Life in Confucian Asia: From Physical Welfare to Subjective Well-being

Takashi Inoguchi · Doh Chull Shin

Accepted: 6 October 2008 / Published online: 31 October 2008
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2008

The end of the state is not a mere life; rather a good quality of life.
Aristotle

Without Goodness, one cannot enjoy enduring happiness.
Confucius

Throughout the world, scholars and policymakers are increasingly concerned with understanding issues related to the quality of life. There is a growing awareness that expanding the gross national product per capita will not, by itself, lead to improved citizen well-being. Quality of life involves much more than income, and economic indicators are not capable of assessing the health of a nation (Diener and Seligman 2004; Lane 2000; Scitovsky 1992; Shin et al. 2003). Thus, with hopes of identifying the factors involved, many government agencies, research institutes, and individual scholars have begun appraising and comparing the quality of life across a number of different countries and regions (Alber et al. 2004; Glatzer 2004; Hagerty et al. 2001; Prescott-Allen 2001; Shek et al. 2005; Shin et al. 2003; United Nations Development Programme 2000; World Bank 2000). As part of this rising global research movement for human betterment, Chuo University and the University of Tokyo in Japan conducted the AsiaBarometer Surveys (ABS) nationally in six East Asian societies. These surveys offer tremendous insight into how increasing prosperity in Confucian Asia has affected subjective well-being among the area's various citizenries (Inoguchi et al. 2007).

1 Confucian Asia's Place in a Changing World

Geographically, Confucian Asia is a small region of Asia, the world's largest continent, stretching from the Middle East to the South Pacific islands. As a region in East Asia, it

T. Inoguchi
Chuo University, Tokyo, Japan
e-mail: tinoguchi@tamacc.chuo-u.ac.jp

D. C. Shin (✉)
University of Missouri at Columbia, Missouri, USA
e-mail: shind@missouri.edu

covers the seven countries of China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam, and one dependent territory, Hong Kong. Each of these societies is remarkable for various reasons. China is the world's most populous nation and has the fastest growing economy on earth. The economies of Hong Kong and Taiwan are among the world's most globalized economies. Japan is the second largest economy and the most rapidly aging nation in the world. South Korea is the most wired nation and the nation that builds the most ships in the world. Singapore is the world's richest non-liberal democracy, and North Korea and Vietnam are two of the world's five remaining communist countries. North Korea, quite unlike Vietnam, remains the poorest and most closed socialist economy in the world. These two underdeveloped socialist countries are not included in this volume.

Culturally, Confucian Asia is, as one would expect, infused with the norms and values taught by Confucius and Mencius (Slingerland 2003). For more than two and a half millennia, Confucianism has directly influenced the way in which ordinary people in these countries live their private and public lives, and the way in which their political leaders run their respective governments. Unlike the values of the Western Enlightenment, Confucian values emphasize family and community over the individual, discipline and hierarchy over freedom and equality, and consensus and harmony over diversity and conflict (Tu 1999). Public opinion surveys conducted in these countries confirm that large majorities of their mass citizenries still remain attached to the Confucian social values of collectivism and hierarchism, and the political norms of illiberal governance featuring rule by the virtues and paternalism (Chu et al. 2008; Shin 2008).

Politically, Confucian Asia constitutes one of the least democratized regions in the world, despite three decades of exposure to democratization forces. The current, third wave of global democratization began to spread to East Asia from Southern Europe in the mid-1970s, yet a majority of East Asian countries have not transformed into democracies. Only two countries, South Korea and Taiwan, have joined the family of third-wave democracies. In Confucian Asia today, non-democracies outnumber democracies. Why has Confucian Asia failed to experience democratization to the same extent as other regions, such as East and Central Europe and Latin America? Many theorists have argued that the cultural values of collectivism, hierarchism, and conformism are undermining democratization forces because they encourage East Asians to hold onto the norms of authoritarian rule and reject those of democracy (Chang et al. 2005; Lindner and Bachtiger 2005; Park and Shin 2006).

Economically, however, Confucian Asia is known as a region of wonders. For three decades beginning in the 1960s, Japan and four so-called little dragons or tigers, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, have expanded their economies at much faster rates than what has occurred in all other world regions. According to an influential World Bank study (1993), between 1965 and 1990, the average growth of GNP per capita in these five countries grew more than twice as fast as that of the OECD economies; three times as fast as that of Latin America; and nearly 10 times as fast as that of sub-Saharan Africa. Even more astounding, China, the core state of Confucian civilization, has in the last 25 years outperformed the four East Asian tigers to become the world's fastest growing economy with an average of more than 9% growth per year. This phenomenal advance began with economic reforms in 1978. Overall, East Asia has, with limited resources, achieved greater socioeconomic modernization than the West ever has since its long history of industrialization and modernization began in the eighteenth century (Dalton and Shin 2006).

As a result of such spectacular expansion of their economies, people in China, Japan, and the four East Asian tigers have been living longer and healthier lives, with more goods and services at their disposal. They have also become more educated and skilled, more

white-collar, more urbanized, and more traveled. However, there has certainly been a downside to the rapid economic growth. East Asians are experiencing increasingly higher levels of alienation, dehumanization, pollution, violent crimes, and governmental control, not to mention they are witnessing the destruction of the misty green landscapes so celebrated in their paintings. Consequently, an increasing number of people in prospering Confucian Asian countries are questioning whether their countries have truly become better places to live.

To date, however, no region-wide research effort has been made to appraise the quality of life which East Asians experience in their private and public lives in the wake of rapid economic growth and social modernization. Which resources and experiences do they most value in their own personal lives? How do their priorities differ across the East Asian societies? These questions and more are explored in the studies included in this groundbreaking special issue, which unlike existing comparative studies of economic development or social welfare in East Asia, encompasses the whole range of life experiences, including those not directly related to a materialistic or physical notion of welfare (Campbell 1981; Inglehart 1977; Offer 1997; Philips 2006; Rescher 1972; Tang 1998).

2 Confucianism Societies

What makes a society “Confucian”? We define Confucian societies as those deeply influenced by a set of philosophical and social doctrines propounded by an ancient Chinese philosopher-pundit known in the West as Confucius (Slingerland 2003). His doctrines emphasize an inevitable link between the need to nurture personal virtues and the need to cultivate the quality of governance, and they are summarized in his notion of Daxue (Great Learning): *kewu zhizhi xiuyang jijia zhiguo pingtianxia* (“investigating reality, reaching truth, nurturing virtue, tidying the family, governing the state, pacifying the world under heaven”).

In Confucianism, learning starts from science (knowing reality) and ethics (inculcating virtues). On the basis of factual knowledge and ethical virtues, Confucianism then aims to build ordered families and morally governed states. Good family life and successful governance, in turn, bring the world under heaven to peace.

Offering codes of personal and governmental morality, the Confucian learning model emphasizes a variety of virtues (Tu 1996). To what extent do the people of Confucian East Asia uphold these virtues? Do the virtues they uphold vary across the region’s countries? To address these questions, the 2006 ABS asked respondents to consider a list of 10 virtues that can be taught at home and to choose the two they consider most important. The list included the Confucian and non-Confucian virtues of (1) independence, (2) diligence, (3) honesty, (4) sincerity, (5) mindfulness, (6) humbleness, (7) religiosity, (8) patience, (9) competitiveness, (10) respect for senior persons, and (11) deference for teachers.

For each country, Table 1 reports the three virtues most frequently mentioned. A careful comparison of these virtues across six East Asian societies reveals that they are alike in choosing three of five Confucian virtues as the two most important goals of educating children. Overwhelming majorities ranging from 94% in Hong Kong to 98% in Japan uphold one of five Confucian virtues, including (1) independence, (2) diligence, (3) honesty, (4) mindfulness, and (5) sincerity. At the same time, large majorities ranging from 87% in China to 96% in Japan refuse to endorse either of the two non-Confucian virtues of religiosity and competitiveness. In all six societies, more than 85% endorse only Confucian virtues as the two most important values for children’s upbringing. This finding makes it

Table 1 The three most frequently mentioned Confucian virtues for children to learn

	Three Confucian virtues		
	First	Second	Third
China	Independence (48%)	Diligence (43%)	Honesty (34%)
Japan	Mindfulness (66%)	Honesty (33%)	Sincerity (28%)
S. Korea	Sincerity (41%)	Honesty (38%)	Independence (37%)
Hong Kong	Honesty (41%)	Diligence (36%)	Independence (34%)
Singapore	Honesty (55%)	Independence (43%)	Diligence (26%)
Taiwan	Diligence (45%)	Honesty (38%)	Independence (36%)

clear that all six East Asian countries surveyed remain, by and large, attached to Confucianism.

A careful scrutiny of the data reported in Table 1, however, shows that Japan stands out from the rest of the East Asian societies (Inoguchi 2006). Japan is the only nation that chooses mindfulness, a virtue governing interpersonal relationships, as one of the two most important educational values, and the virtue not only makes Japan's list but tops it. Moreover, the proportion of Japanese people who choose mindfulness is considerably higher than the proportion choosing any of the other top choices. This focus on mindfulness makes Japan a clear outlier from the rest of Confucian Asia and may explain why the Japanese civilization is distinguished from the Chinese civilization in Samuel Huntington's (1998) classification of eight civilizations. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the six countries covered in this special issue show far more cultural similarity than dissimilarity by accepting Confucian virtues while rejecting non-Confucian virtues.

3 The Notion of Quality of Life

What constitutes quality of life? The quality of life concept has been defined in many different ways (Shek et al. 2005; Storrs 1975; Veenhoven 2000). Some scholars have equated it with access to material goods and services known as "the general requirements for happiness" (Prescott-Allen 2001; von Wright 1972). Others have equated it with positive life experiences (Andrews and Withey 1976; Campbell et al. 1976). While the former focus on the objective conditions in which people live, the latter deal exclusively with how people feel about those conditions and other life experiences. Thus, there are two contrasting approaches—objective and subjective—to the notion of life quality.

Between the two approaches, the studies included in this special issue feature the subjective approach as they equate quality of life with subjective well-being. Underlying this subjective approach is the premise that the word "quality" is an evaluative term admitting degrees of desirability or value; the quality of life is, therefore, like beauty in that it resides in the eye of the beholder, and it can be evaluated only by those who experience it (Allard 1976; Campbell 1981; Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Storrs 1975). Among the various elements and conditions of life, therefore, only those to which people impute value count toward the parameter of life quality.

The quality of life as subjective well-being is, in all of the studies included here, conceptualized as a multi-dimensional, multi-level phenomenon. In assessing their subjective quality of life, people can bear in mind all the things that they deem significant to

them and thus judge the overall quality of their lives. They can also consider particular aspects or domains of their lives and judge each of those domains on a separate basis. Therefore, the ABS asked two sets of questions. The first set of three questions tapped the overall quality of life in terms of happiness, enjoyment, and accomplishment. The second set, a battery of questions, tapped satisfaction or dissatisfaction with sixteen life domains on a five-point verbal scale. These two sets of questions serve as our indicators of two levels of quality of life, global and domain.

4 A Theoretical Model

What determines quality of life? The environment in which people live and the resources they command affect quality of life directly by offering things beneficial or harmful to human existence. Such objective conditions of life also affect its quality indirectly through the mediation of values. Not only do values influence which needs and aspirations people have but different values also cause people to evaluate the same resources in different manners (Campbell et al. 1976; Diener and Suh 1997; Lane 2000). The present study, therefore, emphasizes the consideration of individuals' values to create a complete account of the quality of life people experience.

By addressing both values and objective life conditions, our theoretical model provides a systemic account of the perceived quality of life among the mass publics of Confucian societies. Specifically, the model combines three sets of predictors: (1) objective conditions of life; (2) a way of life; and (3) value priorities. This model hypothesizes that the quality of life people experience primarily depends on their value preferences and priorities. These find expression in the objective conditions of their lives and influence people's use of available resources.

A number of theoretical perspectives are central to the proposed analyses of life quality. The first is the perspective that human values vary considerably in preference and priority across different segments of the same population (Baker 2006; Blondel and Inoguchi 2006). Because people from various segments are not only socialized into different lifestyles but also command varying kinds and differential amounts of resources, they do not always cherish the same things for themselves or for their country. Even when they value the same things, they oftentimes prioritize them differently. Moreover, the same person will prioritize values differently at different stages of life. As Ronald Inglehart (1977) points out, the high value placed on the acquisition of personal wealth and achievement has been slowly transferring to freedom, equality, and accommodation to nature.

The second perspective is that quality of life and the objective conditions of life are, by and large, separate concepts (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Lane 2000). People evaluate their life experiences either positively or negatively according to their own conception of what is good and right in life. Their evaluations also depend upon how they compare themselves with other people. As a result, there is no definite relationship between people's sense of well-being and the objective circumstances of their lives. Happiness may be just as prevalent among the poor as the rich, and dissatisfaction may be as common among the highly educated as the barely educated. Subjective feelings of well-being and ill-being, therefore, cannot be inferred accurately by objective indicators of life conditions. Such subjective feelings can be measured accurately only by asking people directly to what extent they find their life conditions pleasant or unpleasant, and/or fulfilling or disappointing.

Finally, the present study is grounded in the perspective that the production of more material goods and services do not necessarily enhance the quality of citizens' lives

(Easterlin 1973, 1995; Inglehart and Klingemann 2000; Max-Neef 1995). Although up to a certain point greater production of such material resources generally does have a favorable impact upon people's lives, beyond that point more production can actually detract from the overall quality of life by causing congestion, pollution, and dehumanization. Thus, enhancing citizen well-being depends less on investment in economic growth and more on policies that promote good governance, liberty, democracy, trust, and public safety. This understanding of life quality is the reason why the European Union now monitors citizen well-being among its member nations with the Eurobarometer, and why private organizations such as the Pew Foundation assess happiness and life satisfaction in nations around the globe (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2008; Pew Research Center 2007).

5 Organization

The first six articles in this special issue examine the quality of life in each Confucian society from a variety of perspectives. In each article, the first section provides basic information about the featured society's people and the objective conditions of life in which they live. This section also briefly discusses notable changes that have recently taken place concerning those conditions, e.g., democratic and market reform, and their effects on citizen well-being.

The second section presents the demographic profile of respondents to the BS in terms of gender, age, educational attainment, income level, marital status, and religion. This section uses these six demographic variables to analyze how lifestyles, value priorities, and the perceptions of life vary across the different segments of the population.

The third section focuses on lifestyles. Specifically, it highlights the various ways in which people live their lives in terms of spending time and money, and interacting with other people at home and abroad. It also examines the extent to which respondents access public utilities and digital devices. Additionally, it identifies and compares the most and least prevalent lifestyles across the different groups of the population.

The fourth section analyzes how people prioritize their values. It identifies distinct value orientations by examining which resources and activities respondents value above all others and then classifying those values according to the spheres of life they touch. This section then examines how value orientations differ significantly from one population group to another.

The fifth section focuses on the global or overall evaluations of well-being. It first compares the extent to which people experience feelings of happiness, enjoyment, and achievement, and identifies the specific components of global well-being that are most and least lacking. Then, considering all of these feelings together, it estimates the overall level of subjective well-being among the population as a whole. Finally, it identifies the population groups which are most and least likely to live a life of happiness, enjoyment, and achievement.

The sixth section focuses on how people feel about specific life domains. It compares the extent to which they are satisfied or dissatisfied with 16 specific life domains and identifies the particular domains, and spheres of domains that they find most and least satisfying. By counting the number of satisfying and dissatisfying domains for each population group, it also identifies the most and least satisfied among the population. The life domains surveyed are housing, friendships, marriage, standard of living, household

income, health, education, job, neighbors, public safety, the environment, the social welfare system, the democratic system, family life, leisure, and spiritual life.

The seventh section estimates and compares the direct, independent effects of demographics, lifestyles, value priorities, and domain assessments on the overall quality of life and its three components—happiness, enjoyment, and achievement. What makes people live a life of happiness, enjoyment, and achievement? Is it money or family life? Is it the objective conditions of life or subjective assessments of those conditions?

The last section of each of the first six articles highlights and reviews the key findings in light of what is noted in previous research concerning the featured society. Each article concludes with an exploration of how these findings could be applied toward the building of a nation of well-being.

The seventh and final article in this ground breaking special issue compares and contrasts all six Confucian societies in terms of avowed happiness among their respective people. After explicating the philosophical notion of happiness that refers to the quality of a whole human life, it analyzes its dimensional contours in terms of how East Asians experience the feelings of enjoyment, achievement, and/or satisfaction. It then identifies the forces that shape happiness among the people in the six Confucian societies and compares those forces with what is known in the West.

Acknowledgments The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan provided funding for the conducting of the AsiaBarometer Surveys reported in this special issue. The Ministry awarded Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research to the project director Takashi Inoguchi at Chuo University (project number 17002002) for the 2005–2008 period. The Korea Foundation endowed chair professorship at the University of Missouri at Columbia also provided support for the preparation of the special issue.

References

- Alber, J., et al. (2004). *Quality of life in an enlarged Europe*. Ireland: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions.
- Allard, E. (1976). Dimensions of welfare in a comparative Scandinavia study. *Acta Sociologica*, 19, 227–239.
- Andrews, F. M., & Withey, S. B. (1976). *Social indicators of well-being*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Baker, W. (2006). *America's crisis of values: Reality and perception*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Blondel, J., & Inoguchi, T. (2006). *Political cultures in Asia and Europe*. London: Routledge.
- Campbell, A. (1981). *The sense of well-being in America*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., & Rodgers, W. L. (1976). *The quality of American life*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Chang, Y. C., Chu, Y.-h., & Tsai, F. (2005). Confucianism and democratic values in three Chinese societies. *Issues & Studies*, 41(4), 1–33.
- Chu, Y., Diamond, L., Nathan, A., & Shin, D. (Eds.). (2008). *How East Asians view democracy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dalton, R., & Shin, D. (Eds.). (2006). *Citizens, democracy, and markets around the Pacific Rim*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Diener, E., & Seligman, M. (2004). Beyond money: Toward an economy of well-being. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5, 1–31.
- Diener, E., & Suh, E. M. (1997). Measuring quality of life: Economic social, and subjective indicators. *Social Indicators Research*, 40, 189–216.
- European Foundation for the Improvement of Living, Working Conditions. (2008). *Annual report 2007*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications for European Communities.
- Easterlin, R. (1973). Does money buy happiness. *Public Interest*, 30, 3–10.
- Easterlin, R. (1995). Will raising the income of all increase the happiness of all? *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 27, 35–48.
- Frey, B. S., & Stutzer, A. (2002). *Happiness and economics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Glatzer, W. (2004). *Challenges for the quality of life in the contemporary world*. Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.
- Hagerty, M. R., et al. (2001). Quality of life indexes for national policy: Review and agenda for research. *Social Indicators Research*, 55(1), 1–96.
- Huntington, S. (1998). *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of the world order*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Inglehart, R. (1977). *Silent revolution*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, R., & Klingemann, H. (2000). Genes, culture, democracy, and happiness. In E. Diener & M. E. Suh (Eds.), *Culture and subjective well-being*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Inoguchi, T. (2006). Social capital in East Asia. *Prepared for presentation at NAPSIPAG conference in Sydney*, December 4–5, 2006.
- Inoguchi, T., Tanaka, A., Sonoda, S., & Dadabaev, T. (Eds.). (2007). *Human beliefs and values in striding Asia: East Asia in focus*. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten.
- Lane, R. (2000). *The loss of happiness in market democracies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Lindner, W., & Bachtiger, A. (2005). What drives democratization in Asia and Africa? *European Journal of Political Research*, 44, 861–880.
- Max-Neef, M. (1995). Economic growth and quality of life: A threshold hypothesis. *Ecological Economics*, 15, 115–118.
- Nussbaum, M., & Sen, A. (Eds.). (1993). *The quality of life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Offer, A. (Ed.). (1997). *In pursuit of the quality of life*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Park, C. M., & Shin, D. C. (2006). Do Asian values deter popular support for democracy? *Asian Survey*, 46(3), 341–361.
- Pew Research Center. (2007). Happiness is increasing in many places—but why. <http://pewglobal.org/commentary/display.php?AnalysisID=1020>.
- Philips, D. (2006). *Quality of life: Concept, policy and practice*. London: Routledge.
- Prescott-Allen, R. (2001). *The well-being of nations*. Washington, DC: Island Press.
- Rescher, N. (1972). *Welfare: The social issues in philosophical perspective*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Scitovsky, T. (1992). *The joyless economy: The psychology of human satisfaction* (rev. ed.). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Shek, D., Chan, Y. K., & Lee, P. (2005). *Quality-of-life research in Chinese, western, and global contexts*. New York: Springer.
- Shin, D. C. (2008). The third wave in East Asia. *Presented at the State of Democratic Governance in Asia*, 21–22 June, Taiwan National University.
- Shin, D. C., Rutkowski, C., & Park, C. M. (2003). *The quality of life in Korea*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Press.
- Slingerland, E. (2003). *Confucius analects*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Storrs, M. (1975). Quality of life. *Social Indicators Research*, 2(2), 229–248.
- Tang, K. (1998). East Asian industrializing countries: Economic growth and quality of life. *Social Indicators Research*, 43, 69–96.
- Tu, W. (1996). *Confucian traditions in East Asian morality: Moral education and economic culture in Japan and the four mini dragons*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Tu, W. (1999). The confucian world. <http://www.coloradocollege.edu/academics/anniversary/Transcripts/TuTXT.htm>.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2000). *Human development report: Human development and human rights*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Veenhoven, R. (2000). The four qualities of life: Ordering concepts and measure of the good life. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 1, 1–39.
- von Wright, G. (1972). *The varieties of goodness*. London: Routledge and Regan Paul.
- World Bank. (1993). *The East Asian miracle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- World Bank. (2000). *World development indicators 2000*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.